

Footpaths of the Black Isle

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The footpath network of the Black Isle is extensive and worth exploring.



Footpath on North Sutor by Cromarty

The Black Isle is blessed by its large number of off-road paths that take you away from the roads into quieter areas. Some have the status of Core Footpaths of the Highland Core Footpath Network and are usually signposted. Other paths are often unknown to all except those living close by because they do not appear on maps.

Guides to the paths of the Black Isle

There are a couple of books describing walks on The Black Isle, but they form part of wider surveys. Ten walks are described in *Walks Easter Ross & The Black Isle, 30 walks*, Hallewell Walking Guide priced £2.95, and five walks are described in *Loch Ness, Inverness, Black Isle and Affric, 40 Favourite Walks*. Pocket Mountains, priced £6.99. There is also information on the internet with the popular *Walk Highlands* website featuring ten Black Isle walks.

All these guides focus on the same set of paths, which are predominantly coastal walks. Fairy Glen at Rosemarkie is the furthest inland the guides penetrate. The North Coast 500 guides and Explore the Highlands website hardly acknowledge the walking potential of the Black Isle. The fact is that there is an enviable choice of where to walk once you can be confident you will not get lost - and paths are not just a feature of the coastline.

The Core Path Network

The Black Isle's Core Paths provide an introduction to walks in the interior of the Black Isle, but the paths have their shortcomings. The paths are named and mapped by Highland Council and are available on their website as PDFs. https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/download/189/core_paths_in_ross_and_cromarty. For the Black Isle there are eight maps to show the 75 Core Paths, but with six exceptions they are paths that connect roads. Such paths start and finish on a road, so unless you retrace your steps, you must continue your walk on a road. The six

exceptions include the fine paths that circuit Drumderfit Hill, Wood Hill and Spital Wood. For most people, I suspect a circular off-road walk is the more appealing.



Highland Core Path RC 36.02 Charleston West Circuit : North Kessock to Lettoch

Ordnance Survey Mapping

Ordnance Survey is the prime mapmaker for the UK and their 1:25,000 Explorer Map 432 of the Black Isle shows the land in exceptional detail. This detail though is based on what appeared on earlier maps and can be identified from modern aerial surveys. “Ground truth” is often lacking. Evidence of a path or track on an OS map can overstate what is there, and many unmapped tracks are valuable to local residents in their daily life. Nonetheless, carrying an OS map on a walk should open your eyes to much more than the ground beneath your feet.



The Black Isle Visitor Map

The Visitor Map of the Black Isle created by Black Isle Tourism and Transition Black Isle is the most comprehensive footpath map of the Black Isle, with its paths tested in recent years with additional feedback from walkers using earlier editions of the map. The Visitor Map is more than a footpath map, as it also includes recommended on- and off-road cycle routes. Off-road cycle routes that double as walkers’ paths are particularly prone to difficulty in excessively wet conditions, or when frozen, or when summer vegetation becomes waist high. Some may see this unexpected variety when following any path as fun!

Often you will meet no-one else during a walk. You may then question whether you are the only person who walks the paths. But wait until there is snow on the ground and you find footprints of others who went before you, and evidence that paths are the

natural runs of wild animals. You see so few other people because with such an extensive off-road area to choose from, it is seldom that your route will coincide with theirs.

Circular walks on the Black Isle



Path through woodland between Kilmuir and Loch Lundie

Exploring the Black Isle is to revel in its diversity. If a footpath is on a map, there is the incentive to walk it to find out what may make it special. Sure enough, over the years, one generates a list of favourites from the dozens walked, but there is barely one not worth repeating, especially at a different season of the year.

Over the years I have explored over forty circular walks on the Black Isle. I have favourites; the places you take your visitors when you want to wow them. Foremost for me are: Drummondreach Oak Wood, McFarquhar's Bed, the coast of Rosemarkie Bay, Loch Lundie, Culbokie Woods, Munloch Bay, Gallowhill Wood, Redcastle, Monadh Mòr, Spital Wood, Simon's Loch, The South Sutor, Drumderfit Hill, Rosehaugh Estate, Feddanhill Wood, and Wood Hill and Ormond Castle.

Winter walking on the Black Isle

In winter, when the sun is shining, it is good to feel the sunshine, and then skillful use of a map can suggest a walk that will not be shaded by hillsides or tree cover. In the middle of winter, the sun is low in the sky and restricted to the SE to SW quadrant so the slopes of the Black Isle facing the Moray and Beaulie firths have much to recommend for walks on a sunny day. The beaches by Rosemarkie are particularly favoured as the quality of the sand hardly varies through the year. The road along the shore of the Beaulie Firth from North Kessock to Redcastle attracts many walkers as few cars use the road.

Icy winter days can be less appealing for walks, but if access roads have been gritted, there is usually unfrozen ground under a woodland canopy. The trees also buffer the strength of the wind and so within the winter woods at ground level all can be calm and even quiet. The forest roads

used for extraction of timber may well be icy and deserve respect, but the true footpaths can be followed at ease. Many villages have woods close by that are just as popular in winter, for example: Culbokie Woods, the woodland of Cromarty House and the South Sutor, Feddanhill Wood above Fortrose, and Ord Hill for North Kessock.

In winter, the favoured climate of the Black Isle draws mountaineers and experienced hillwalkers who would otherwise wish to be on Munros, but where snow conditions and more often low cloud would make such excursions unrewarding. The Black Isle's attractions are different and safer and can be enthusiastically enjoyed.



Path through Gallowhill Wood

Longer walks

For longer linear walks there is Day 1 of the John o' Groats Trail from Inverness to Culbokie - 14 miles, and the walk from Rosemarkie to Cromarty via Eathie Fishing Station (tide permitting) - 16 miles. For the purist there is the officially designated Heritage Path erroneously called a "Military Road" from Mount High to Wester Strath of Auchterflow - 6 miles, but this forest track is best cycled, as neither end of the walk is convenient for public transport and there is little variety along its length. The Black Isle's other designated Heritage Path is the old road to Milton of Redcastle from Bishop Kinkell - 4 miles. This "path" sweeps through Spital Wood but is predominately a road route with the off-road sections poorly mapped.

Landscape Diversity

The Black Isle was once almost as famous for its stone as its agriculture, and footpaths pass the quarries where stone was cut for Fortrose Cathedral, the Caledonian Canal and the fine, red-stoned buildings in the vicinity. Footpaths pass by burial cairns and forts, and many archaeological features of the Black Isle landscape. Footpaths take you to off-road viewpoints and provide an unhurried view of the farming activity of the Black Isle; footpaths also take you into Sites of Special Scientific Importance (SSSIs), and get you close to fungi and wildlife and inland

lochs. Sections of the Black Isle Railway that ran from Muir of Ord to Fortrose provide popular essentially flat walking and cycling routes, while the ultimate flat path is the coastal circuit of Chanonry Ness with the lighthouse at its Point.



The Black Isle Railway Line between Avoch and Fortrose, now a Core Path of the Highland Network

Accessible Paths

What the Black Isle lacks are paths leaving all the villages by safe off-road routes. Paths safe for parents with prams and buggies, safe for older people who drive mobility scooters and safe for our kids who are old enough to be independent, and safe for cyclists too. Multi-purpose paths leaving our villages are needed for the start of any further exploration of our countryside.

Conclusion

There is much to explore. Take a map and perhaps some secateurs if you want the path to be even better for others. Photograph the walks and see how the same path changes over the year. If you come up with problems on a walk, please e-mail info@transitionblackisle.org and maybe volunteers can improve the path and ensure the next edition of a Visitor Map has its footpaths fully up-to-date. Above all, enjoy the Rights to Responsible Access enshrined in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, and get close to nature and sense that your well-being is enhanced.